



UNDERSTANDING THE URBAN
HISTORY THROUGH
CINEMATOGRAPHY: BLADE RUNNER
(1982) AS THE COMMENT ON
POSTMETROPOLIS

Introduction

Novelistic representation of cities can depict the built environment of a particular city in a particular period of time allowing the reader to experience urban conditions and gets an understanding of the reasons behind them. Following my class research on the novelistic representation of imagined urbanity of the future, I decided to delve into imagined urbanity in the cinematography and in the genre of urban phantasmagorias in particular. *Blade Runner* (1982) has been chosen as a unit of analysis for my short paper as applying the idea of Mass Ornament by Kracauer the main story of the movie on the production of replicants criticize the postmodern society and urban fabric that could or may be generated by it.

Blade Runner and its' relation to urban history

Urban phantasmagorias can be defined as a valid part that constructs urban imagery of modern time. Representing the real world, the representation is not just existing by itself but rather it is shaped and influenced by the reality and the reality, in turn, is changing as well. This representation often becomes reality in our imagination and can embody the built environment around. Just like the novelistic representation of Copenhagen reveals the features inherent to urban environment and experiences of people who happen to inhabit the city, subjected to all urban conditions, urban phantasmagorias can reveal the life of the city, its' beginning and its' end. According to P. Madsen's chapter on imagined urbanity (2002), another important point in the novelistic representation of Copenhagen is the historical core of the novels that usually put their protagonists in the real built environment sometimes even covering the historical period of changes that this environment underwent. This point led me to look for the basis of urban phantasmagorias as often they represent the future. The most important statement about the concept of phantasmagoria is that, unlike fantasy and pure fantastic representation, it is strongly linked to concrete possibilities. According to M. Berdet (2010), a phantasmagoria may be defined as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of the society to its real condition of existence". Neither a fantastic, impossible world nor a completely materialized reality, a phantasmagoria lies somewhere in between, a potential existence, a virtual realization—in the sense that the virtual is not the opposite of the real but, on the contrary, the expression of a reality to come, as a potential and plausible existence (Lévy, 1995), a reality constantly in the making, but never completely satisfied as imagined, permanently haunting the present. An urban phantasmagoria is therefore essentially a virtual representation of a possible urban reality that is still uncertain and not desired with any certainty: something that is imagined in a socio-technological framework in the imminence of existing F. Duarte (2014). Taking into account everything above-mentioned I can make an assumption that being utopian or dystopian, urban phantasmagorias are a critical depiction of the world, of what could/may happen to that world or never will, thus making the topic of urban phantasmagorias worth of deep research and investigation.

In the chapter of novelistic representation of Copenhagen, P. Madsen (2002) describes several novels that for him uncover the urban life of the great city. For my investigation, I as well picked the representative of urban phantasmagorias – *Blade Runner* (1982) that in my personal opinion can reveal much more than has already been discovered. According to M. Davis (1994), the movie has acquired iconic status as "Los Angeles' dystopic alter ego", the "official nightmare" shaping ideas of the city's future. *Blade Runner* has been studied and research for many times, but nevertheless it offers examples of how the shaping of urban imagery anticipates the way cities and urban life may be transformed under the influence of pervasive innovative

technologies and vice-versa, that is to say, how technological society might be inspired by represented realities. As Constable (2006) argues, it “is no longer possible for current science fiction to explore a range of parallel, double or possible universes because such distinctions are eliminated within the single, all-encompassing universe of simulation that constitutes the hyperreal”.

Reading Blade Runner

The movie starts at Los Angeles in 2019 depicting the future of contemporary society. Postindustrial decay of the city highlights the connection between postmodernism and late capitalism. This future is seen as the further development of the current state of the city and social order inherent to late capitalism. The city in Blade Runner is not ultra modern but the postmodern G. Bruno (1987). Instead of ultra-comfortable skyscrapers, the atmosphere in the city reveals decay, the dark side of technological development and the process of disintegration. Though the name of the city is Los Angeles, the landscape could belong to any other big metropolis be it Tokyo or New York. We are not presented with a real geography, but an imaginary one: a synthesis of mental architectures. Mental particles extracted from postcards, photos, pictures etc. The pertinence and uniqueness of architecture to specific places, cultures, and times has been lost in postmodernism. The metropolis of Blade Runner quotes not only from different spatial structures but from temporal ones as well. In such a city the society of simulation takes its' positions and produces pure simulacrum in which according to Baudrillard free-floating signifier becomes finally detached from its' signified or any image, representation from its' original. Simulation spells the end of “realism” and the onset of hyperreality, a realm where imitation usurps, indeed is “better than”, the real thing P. Brooker (2006). Following this, Blade Runner demonstrates us gigantic advertisements billboards with the image of Japanese Geisha subjected to the society of simulation and consumerism and detached from the original cultural or historical content. Now in the city of Blade Runner, her signification has been reduced to a simple signifier of something possibly produced in Japan. The same story is observed when people start to communicate with each other. The language of the Blade Runner is a combination of English, Arab and Japanese again diminished to representations of these languages as a consequence of globalization. And adding to the idea of pure simulacrum every and each animal that we see is not real and even when the protagonist of the movie asks whether the owl in Tyrell's office is alive he gets a response “Of course not!” understanding that imitation is always better than the real thing.

In such an urbanity led by a pure simulacrum, technological advancement allowed people to produce a replicant – nonhumans in order to conquer deep space. Replicants are designed to handle work too dangerous or arduous for humans. They are invented as slave labor in the off-world colonies. The invention of these replicants seems to guarantee the emancipation from physical suffering in terms of technological development. The creation of replicants identical to humans is considered the triumph of the modernist project, constructed under the name of humanism S. Park (2012). Following the story of the movie, we see the opposition and battle between humans and replicants that became violent due to their almost slavery position and were prohibited from Earth. Putting replicants in the society of simulation the idea of Mass Ornament by Kracauer steps into mind. Just like in Tiller Girls “the individual becomes an unconscious part of a whole of which the individual is unable to gain an overview” H. Reeh (2006), replicants are considered as the part of the whole that is supposed to function in a particular way

and is inferior to humans. Another crucial point of Kracauer's Mass Ornament is its' "closed uniformity emptied of any content" H. Reeh (2006) and subsequent reduction of the human being to a mere functional element of a mechanism alien to life. Here, the replicants is an exact depiction of that hypothesis as they emptied from everything human from any content including memory or empathy and diminished into functions. They are mass produced and dismissed of spontaneity and self-reflection of the individual.

Conclusion

Contemporary Los Angeles continues to evolve away from, not towards, the imagined nightmare city of 2019. However, analyzing Blade Runner as urban phantasmagoria one can say that it is not about an alien world perceived as a distant impossible fantasy. Rather it is about the future to be, the intrinsic future of contemporary cities. In particular Blade Runner is a comment on postmetropolis where society of simulation led by technological advancement dehumanize human beings. This dehumanization may be seen from two perspectives: one is massification of society, controlled by superpowered machines; the other is transformation of human essence itself through the influence of technology. By criticizing the modern civilization Blade Runner offers to analyze the essence of humanness, power and society and their reciprocal relations towards each other.

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